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The Spiritual Connection: Honoring Faith Traditions and Polishing "Spiritual Literacies" in the Writing Conference at Christian Institutions

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"I distrust pious phrases, particularly when they issue from my mouth."

-Flannery O'Connor[1]

Including Faith-based Institutions in Writing Center Theory and Practice

Much has been said about the future of writing centers and the need for consultants to respect the multifaceted literacies and diverse backgrounds of their clientele.[2] In light of this issue's theme of "connected writing," writing center scholarship's interest in bridging gaps between race, socio-economic status, and multimodal literacies proves that genuine connection is truly a priority in writing center theory and practice. But scholars have said surprisingly little about the effect of "spiritual literacies" and faith traditions on student writing: for instance, how might a writer's faith inform her writing patterns and, relatedly, how does her writing represent her religious convictions?[3] What role does the consultant/tutor play in helping a writer negotiate the presentation of her spirituality within a larger community's written discourse? Perhaps most importantly, how can we help students write about their faith in a way that helps them connect with others outside of their faith tradition?

Consideration of the writing center at a faith-based college or university—indeed, the faith-based institution at-large—can help us probe the question of how spirituality impacts literacy, especially within the context of a writing conference. We are quick to study writing centers' relationship to non-native English speakers, non-traditional students, and clients with diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, but few writing center practitioners have yet investigated how we can respect and negotiate faith traditions in a writing conference.[4] I argue in this essay that a closer look at how we help clients write about their faith within the context of a Christian institution offers writing center scholarship the opportunity to connect "faith traditions" to our ongoing discussions about diversity.

I should qualify at the outset that I write from a Christian perspective and that my employer is a large, private Christian university in the Southwest.[5] While the most comprehensive form of scholarship on this topic might be a general consideration of faith traditions in writing center practice, I believe that the particularity of my context has much to reveal about the surprising challenges we encounter when students attempt to write about their experience of spirituality. My hope is that the observations I offer about my rhetorical context in the world of Christian higher education would be informative and enlightening to rhetorical contexts outside my own.

The article is divided into three sections: (1) I identify "spiritualized language" as a chief obstacle tutors encounter when working with Christian clients, especially at a college or university that openly identifies as Christian; (2) I stress the importance of allowing Christian students the opportunity to interrogate the rhetorical context of the faith-based institution; and (3) I suggest a few practical strategies to help tutors encourage writers to polish their spiritualized language in a way that does not denigrate the writer's use of religious rhetoric or sentiments. Although specific to Christian higher education, ideally these insights will reveal the complicated relationship between spirituality and personal literacy. Furthermore, the claims I pose in this essay are meant to encourage other scholar-practitioners to consider how writing center scholarship might expand to include the faith-based college or university, and, more generally, the ways writing centers must confront spirituality as a sometimes significant component of clients' identities.

The Reality of Spiritualized Language in Christian Contexts

To demonstrate what I mean by "spiritualized language," let me offer a vignette of my first day teaching freshman composition as a graduate student at a faith-based institution: in order to break the ice, I asked my students to share what brought them to our

institution in particular. The responses involved statements like,

> "I feel that God has called me to be here."
>
> "When I prayed about it, it just seemed like this was part of God's will for my life."
>
> "I want my time at college to bring glory to God."
>
> "God laid on my heart that this university would best prepare me for service to the Kingdom."
>
> "Coming here is a way I can strengthen my walk with the King."

Sometimes they were remarkably specific:

> "God has anointed me to be a senior pastor at a Baptist church, which is why I'm going to be a religion major."

During my time as a writing center tutor at the same institution, I also encountered this spiritualized language in student writing, but its prevalence was solidified for me when I heard it used aloud in the classroom setting. The widespread nature of what is commonly called "Christianese" also appeared to an overwhelming degree in individual writing conferences I held with my students as a composition instructor.

When my students use spiritualized language to describe vocational goals as well as everyday activities, I am both surprised and frustrated. While I am excited that they feel comfortable explaining their experiences through the lens of faith, I worry that these expressions will not translate to effective communication outside of the Christian college setting. Like many, I feel that a mark of mature faith—in any religious tradition—is the ability to communicate the nuances of that faith in such a way that outsiders need not acquire a spiritual dictionary to understand the heart of our meaning.

Instructors and writing center practitioners who work in Christian higher education often find themselves addressing this spiritual rhetoric in the written work of their students or clients—expressions and terminology that are belittlingly referred to as "Sunday school speak." Indeed, much of this rhetoric is exclusive and compromises the viability of writers' words in contexts outside of their institutions. More dishearteningly, though, it demonstrates writers' own limitations in speaking of spiritual matters. Popular evangelical Christian expressions such as "God laid this on my heart," "live life in the Word," or "doing Kingdom work" (as well as terms like "biblical womanhood" or even "evangelical" itself) often prove unstable when subjected to deconstruction, not because the writers' words are disingenuous, but because they have rarely been asked to articulate the implications of such statements to readers who are either unfamiliar with or not complicit in the use of these expressions. As popular Christian writer Kathleen Norris explains,

> richly textured religious language…can lead us astray…[L]anguage such as this, lovely and resonant as it is, can cushion the radical nature of our intimacy with God and make Christian discipleship sound far too easy. (Norris 52-3)

The challenge for tutors is to gracefully identify "richly textured religious language" in client writing and encourage those writers to refine their language—all without denigrating the spiritual and emotional value of these oft-employed expressions. The danger of passing over these phrases without question, as Norris suggests above, is that the writer may fall prey to oversimplifying the often extremely complicated connotations of theological statements, which are artfully disguised by the veil of religious language.

Representatives of the Faith: Spiritualized Language and Rhetorical Context

I feel that the first step to helping student writers at religious institutions refine their own "Sunday school speak" is to introduce them to their rhetorical context—namely, a context (the Christian college or university) that carries with it a great deal of history. In doing so, we teach them that because Christianity was culturally taken for granted at the advent of the American university, the growth of higher level academic discourse about faith and Christian spirituality was stifled. Eventually, it was nearly silenced. By communicating to these writers that we are in a rebuilding (perhaps initial building) stage of a distinctly "Christian scholarship," we give them permission to help participate in its development. Furthermore, when writing center clients at a Christian college or university are entrusted with part of that responsibility, they may take the process much more seriously.[6]

Outside of the writing center, students' general expectations upon arriving at a Christian college or university are difficult to pinpoint. They may, of course, have practical questions: Will my professors pray at the start of each class? Will I be required to attend chapel? How late can I stay out? And what exactly does "dry campus" mean? But their conception of the oft-repeated phrase "integration of faith and learning" is less explicit. What do students imagine when they hear "faith and learning" throughout their university careers? Are the terms related in students' minds, or are they neatly tucked away in their own respective spheres?

David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith point to this division right at the outset of their important

collection *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (2011):

> [F]or a long time the constellation of Christian colleges and universities that continue to exist (and grow) in the United States often operated with a dualistic conception of the relationship between faith and learning…[W]hat made a college "Christian" was the presence of a chapel, the prescription of certain mores in the dorms, and a blanket of prayer over the whole project...[T]he classroom, laboratory, and scholarship were still considered neutral. (Smith and Smith 1)

Even at a major Christian research university, my first-year students in English composition can articulate this split. University Chapel and church are for faith, they say, while the classroom (even the religion classroom) is for learning. What students do not realize is how the history of Christianity in the American university perhaps encouraged this division. In fact, students' knowledge of the history of "Christian colleges," let alone "Christian thinking," is decidedly limited.

The writing tutor at a faith-based institution can play a substantial role in helping tutees understand the depth and breadth of their rhetorical context. While it is possible to prompt writers to talk about their general perception of Christianity in the academy, this may not be enough to help them fully realize how the Christian college or university occupies a particular rhetorical space. The tutor, in fact, maintains a unique position in the tutoring relationship since he or she can act as a translator for the rhetorical context, a context that even Christian students at a Christian-affiliated institution might not understand.

The history of Christianity in the American university is of course lengthy and complicated. In general, Christian students have never heard of significant historical studies such as George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* (1996) or Mark Noll's groundbreaking *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1995). Introducing these students to larger conversations about faith and learning does not necessarily require that students read these texts, though. Simply giving students a bit of background on Christian colleges and universities provides perspective on their rhetorical context.

For example, writers at a Christian institution benefit from understanding the baggage that accompanies their context and the degree to which the larger scholarly community views that context with wariness. As George Marsden explains, "current suspicions of Christian perspectives in the academy are reactions—often understandable—to the long establishment of Christianity in higher education" (14). Tutors might briefly highlight how in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Protestant Christianity was the norm at most American universities, and "not much effort was made to relate Christianity specifically to what was being studied" (Marsden 15). Marsden continues, "[Christianity] had built few intellectual defenses, since its monopoly had never been seriously challenged" (15-16). This trend progressed, and the bifurcation of scholarship and faith persisted into the present, resulting in grounds for Noll's now well-known claim: "American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations" (Noll 1). In other words, Christian writers must face the reality that, historically, their thinking has not always been welcome in the American academy.

A tutor might help a writer come to grips with this complicated history by posing questions that help situate the writer within their rhetorical context: "Your use of the phrase 'God laid this on my heart' tells your reader that you are a person of faith; in what ways do you believe your reader's perception of you changes after reading this line? How do you believe Christians are perceived in academic contexts today? Do Christians have a responsibility to 'explain themselves' when they employ religious language in their writing?" By opening up a dialogue about the relationship between faith and the academy, the tutor encourages the writer to see how faith—often one of the most significant aspects of an individual's identity—might influence the rhetorical context and vice versa.

Strategies for Revising Religious Jargon

Christian writers frequently do not realize they are using religious jargon, especially if most of their peers identify with Christianity and are engaged with Christian sub-culture. As Grace Veach explains, this language "can bewilder someone from outside their faith tradition," and "[b]ecause they have heard these words so frequently, [Christian students] don't even think when they use them" (447). I am by no means suggesting that tutors attempt to change the way their clients talk about faith in their peer groups, but I would argue that this jargon and rhetoric deserves special attention if we want to develop these Christian tutees into thoughtful writers who can continue to engage issues of faith in contexts outside of the Christian college milieu.

A short brainstorming session of the various connotations of a single word or phrase that appears repeatedly in client writing can reveal its rhetorical instability and allow the writer to "re-see" the term.

Even at a Christian college or university, the spiritual backgrounds of students are varied (often not "Christian" at all), and this, in turn, contributes to the diversity of connotations attached to a word or phrase. For example, when I pose "biblical womanhood" to my students in the composition classroom and ask what associations it provokes, I get the following responses (which I like to list on the blackboard):

> feminine; dainty; mother; fertility; submission; Michelle Duggar; oppression; Proverbs 31 woman; pretty; kind; follows Bible's "rules" for women; stay-at- home mom; sweet; family-focused; the girl who wrote *Kisses from Katie* [author Katie Davis]; helpmeet; Virgin Mary[7]

The spectrum of these associations is fascinating. It is also of note that most of my students (particularly female students) are in pre-professional programs such as pre-business or pre-medicine. The women who come to mind for "biblical womanhood" are Michelle Duggar, mother to 19 and star of the TLC reality show *19 Kids and Counting*; Katie Davis, the now famous 22 year-old missionary who moved to Uganda and is in the process of adopting 13 little girls; and the Virgin Mary herself. These extremes are a far cry from the vocational paths many of my female students will pursue (the mention of the word "oppression" in the brainstorming session highlights this paradox). Sheryl Sandberg, successful COO of Facebook and author of the bestseller *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), apparently does not make the "biblical womanhood" cut even though she is a more natural mentor for my pre-professional female students.

The point of airing these verbal associations in a public forum is to reveal the inconsistencies of this religious jargon, which is a task students of faith are rarely asked to do in religious contexts. Indeed, the thesis of Rachel Held Evan's recent book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (2012), is to expose the inconsistencies in the very term I posed to my students. As Evans explains, "In an attempt to simplify, we try to force the Bible's cacophony of voices into a single tone, to turn a complicated and at times troubling holy text into a list of bullet points we can put in a manifesto or creed" (295). The same might be said of spiritual language in student and client writing. In an effort to create a common spiritual lexicon—that includes expressions like "house of God," "biblical attitude," or "Spirit of God"—Christians often err on the side of oversimplification.

In the writing center conference, brainstorming the different connotations of religious language can happen on a smaller scale. Even asking the client to briefly poll off-duty tutors during the writing conference can give her an opportunity to step outside of her own perspective. In writing conferences with my own composition students, I will ask them to create a word cloud around the jargon in question, a visual reminder that some words are subject to a high level of instability. When a writer realizes that a word or expression might not hold up to scrutiny, especially outside the context of a Christian institution, they are more likely to reconsider their diction and opt for more inclusive language. Nancy Welch supports this posture toward "re-vision" when she writes that serious revision "begins with a sense of *dissonance*, of something that hasn't or won't adapt" (Welch 30, original emphasis). The dissonance for writers that arises when they see that an oft-repeated religious phrase cannot always adapt to other contexts is invaluable in polishing their habitual use of spiritualized language.

Contextualizing and revising spiritually rich expressions in isolation are helpful practices, but longer passages of writing that rely on religious jargon to communicate meaning reveal how spiritual language is often a central component of writers' understanding of their faith. As Jennifer Gray suggests, when we examine student language we are able to perceive "not only what the student is communicating, but also what the student is doing, what position the student is taking, what relationship the student is advancing with her subject, and *how the student values what she is discussing*" (Gray 1, my emphasis). If, for instance, a writer's spiritual literacy includes the phrase "filled with the Spirit" to explain heightened moments of spiritual ecstasy, then it could perhaps feel patronizing to have an instructor probe by saying, "Sure, but what do you *really mean* by that?" Above all, we must respect the faith traditions of our students while still pushing them to re-see the implications of their words. A more neutral question in this instance might be, "What do you value about this spiritual expression—'filled with the Spirit'?" By stressing that the enactment of one's personal literacy is often tied to an articulation of values, tutors can push tutees toward a deeper understanding of why they write the way they do.

On a practical level, I believe that the best way to encourage writers to be sensitive to the religious language they use in their own writing is to first distance them from it by introducing a piece of writing from an anonymous student they have never met. Then, encourage them to empathize with the anonymous student by imagining that student's own spiritual baggage via the language they use. By employing a kind of embodied revision (or, in other words, seeing the topic from the imagined perspective of the other writer), these writers are pushed to re-see

a prototype of another who relies on spiritualized language—and who may not be so different from the writer him or herself.

To demonstrate, I have included a selection of writing that I feel best represents the "richly textured religious language" to which Christian students so often revert. The topic, "required chapel attendance," is familiar to my students since they are required by the university to attend a class-wide chapel service twice a week. In this example, language classified as "Sunday school speak" is italicized:

> When students walk into a University Chapel service, they should be *overwhelmed by the Spirit of God*. Chapel is very class-like, and there are a lot of rules about using cell phones and laptops. It just doesn't feel like *a house of God*. People have a different attitude when they walk into a sanctuary on Sunday mornings, but this *biblical attitude* doesn't appear when they walk into chapel services during the week. The problem I see is that chapel isn't making the room into *holy space charged with God's presence*, and the students required to go aren't meeting the chaplains halfway with their own attitude. To fix this, chapel should feel more like Sunday morning so students would have reason to treat it seriously.

After reading this passage, it is clear that the writer has a genuine interest in altering her chapel experience. But the ambiguity begins in the first sentence: "[students] should be overwhelmed by the Spirit of God." To a certain degree, readers can intuit the general meaning of this phrase, but what the student does not realize is how the experience of "being overwhelmed by the Spirit of God" inevitably varies from person to person. And what exactly does the student mean by "Spirit of God?" Is this feeling akin to Eastern medicine's vision of Chi? Is it a ghostly, supernatural figure that participants actually see? The implications of "spirit" alone are complicated. And what of "house of God?" How do we distinguish between places that are God's house and others that are not?

When I encounter a student who frequently relies on religious jargon in his writing, I use roughly 5-7 minutes of the writing conference to ask him to read and revise this short passage I've included above. After listening to the student read the passage aloud, I pose a series of questions that are meant to help him practice "re-seeing" the religious jargon he himself uses through the eyes of an anonymous student: What is this student's religious background? Has she been a part of a religious community for most of her life, or is she relatively new to Christianity? Who taught her to use this language when she speaks of matters of faith? What is her overall assessment of chapel? Is she disappointed in chapel itself, or disappointed in her fellow participants?

A student's answers to these questions are imagined realities, of course, but this practice encourages students to picture the writer behind the writing. When they practice empathizing with something they would normally look down on, the tone of their revisions is generally more careful and thoughtful. The goal, I explain during the conference, is for them to help this imagined student get her meaning across in a way that is not rhetorically exclusive or ambiguous, but that still maintains the integrity of her perspective. Furthermore, I push students to practice revising the student's thought-process, not just substitute jargon for more inclusive phrases. (When students are finished revising the passage, I tell them that I myself wrote the passage after pulling together an amalgamation of terms I have encountered in the classroom and in conferences with students.)

While most of the revisions these student writers produced are thoughtful and empathetic, they could be grouped into two categories with varying levels of effectiveness: (1) revisions in which students attempt to revise religious jargon with more religious jargon and (2) revisions that remain very attached to the original excerpt while not only clarifying the anonymous student's apparent meaning, but also deepening it.[8] The following selections demonstrate both kinds of revisions. Original spelling, syntax, and phraseology are maintained in all selections.

The first category of revisions revealed just how ingrained this spiritual language might be in the minds of students:

> When students walk into University Chapel, they should have an open mind and be ready to learn about the Word of God. It just doesn't feel like a good environment to learn about God. The problem I see is that chapel isn't making the room a church filled with joy and longing to learn about God.

One revision in this first category even challenged the anonymous student's complaint, implying that compulsory chapel attendance might be equivalent to a kind of holy obedience:

> When students walk into a University Chapel service, they should be happy to rejoice in the name of God. Chapel is very charged with God's presence due to the fact that students are required to go. The "requirement" of chapel seems to rub some students the wrong way.

The second category of revisions, though, displays embodied revision at its best. These students were

careful to maintain the overall structure of the anonymous student's excerpt, but carefully nuanced the student's logic as well and language:

> Chapel is described as a space to drop what is causing you stress, feel connected to God, and leave feeling refreshed and rejuvenated—in the syllabus, that is. The chapel employees believe that rigid rules on cell phone and laptop use, forced attendance, and strict policies allow for such a place. However, these components look identical to what is expected in an academic class, which in no sense is a place to be stress-free and connected to a higher being.
>
> When students walk into a University Chapel service, they should feel a sense of invitation.
>
> However, Chapel is very class-like, and there are a lot of rules about using cell phones and laptops…The problem I see is that chapel is not making the room inviting, and the students required to go should not feel as if they are constantly being observed by the chaplains based on behavior.

What these student revisions reveal is the value of *nuance* in writing about spiritual matters. In particular, the second example's suggestion that students "should feel a sense of invitation" when they attend Chapel effectively communicates the conventional implications of a religious service without overwhelming the reader with specialized religious language. This exercise not only asks students to empathize with an unknown writer (who is actually their instructor in disguise), but also helps them justify the value of carefully choosing language that is nuanced, inclusive, and respectful of the sentiments of spirituality. Practicing this kind of revision also lets the writer and the tutor/instructor broach a bigger conversation about how we talk about faith and how it affects our public discourse.

Many of these revisions simply require students to more thoughtfully define their terms, but these particular phrases and expressions occupy an emotional position in students' spiritual histories.[9] If a student has only ever used the phrase "moved by the Spirit of God" in relation to a personal conversion experience, then they may feel their experience is diminished when probed to "define their terms." The hope, however, is that further interrogation actually adds value to the spiritual experience in the long run since it allows them to legitimize their experience without relying on exclusive or even overly pious language. Flannery O'Connor's words in the headnote of this essay—"I distrust pious phrases, particularly when they issue from my mouth"—remind us that activities like the ones I suggest here push writers to question the words that "issue from [their] mouth[s]," a kind of self-study that privileges introspection, reflection, and recognition of one's particular rhetorical and spiritual contexts. In the rhetorical context of the Christian faith specifically, these practices encourage writers not only to consider the persuasive impact of their writing, but also to assume a more charitable posture when they address matters of faith—a posture non-Christians would affirm as well.

Conclusion

As I hope I have demonstrated in this article, the writing center housed in a faith-based institution is full of research potential for how religious students write about faith within a religious context. The notion that Christian students, in particular, may have their own rhetorical patterns in relation to their spirituality perhaps indicates that students of other cultural demographics may have comparable patterns yet to be explored. It is time for writing center scholarship to more openly consider the unique perspective of writing centers housed in religious institutions and to investigate what they can add to the conversation on diversity. In pursuit of connection across cultural, ethnic, economic, and social borders in the writing center, we must not diminish the reality that faith tradition often stretches across these boundaries, simultaneously transcending and complicating the neat categories we would like to assign to our research.

Notes

1. O'Connor, *Spiritual Writings*, p. 53
2. Indeed, Volume 10.1 of *Praxis* featured articles that addressed the theme, "Diversity in the Writing Center."
3. My use of the term "spiritual literacy" is a re-imagination of Wendy Bishop's concept of "personal literacy." Bishop defines "personal literacy" in this way: "the story of coming into language, of learning how to read and write, of learning what reading and writing mean in one's life" (Bishop 52).
4. One short article of interest on this point is Laura Rich's "When Theologies Conflict: Reflections on role issues in a Christian writing center." Rich highlights the unique way in which tutors have access to conversations about faith, especially at a Christian institution, since the conference setting lends itself to a detail-oriented interrogation of claims and ideas.
5. My university is affiliated with a Protestant denomination, but my use of the term "Christian" is certainly inclusive of all North American institutions that claim a Christian heritage, be their affiliation Catholic, LDS, Protestant, etc.
6. The concept of "Christian scholarship" in higher education is fairly recent. For more on the nature of Christian scholarship as well as its position within the academy, I suggest George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

7. I collected these responses on the blackboard during a discussion of "loaded words" in my Fall 2013 composition class.
8. These revision selections were collected over the course of the Spring 2013 semester. Students were informed that their revisions were a part of a larger study on religious language in college writing and that selections of their work might be anonymously cited in a written report.
9. Although Sharon Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* strongly criticizes the Christian Right's use of emotional language for persuasive ends (to the extent that she risks alienating readers who identify as Christian but not fundamentalist), she is correct in noting that this kind of language is often fueled by the speaker's emotional connection to the words.

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